

Homiletics Analysis: Matthew 21

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Matthew 21 is one of the most dramatically concentrated chapters in the Gospel, marking the formal inauguration of Jesus' final week in Jerusalem. The chapter opens with the Triumphal Entry (vv. 1–11), in which Jesus deliberately orchestrates His arrival on a donkey in fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9, entering the holy city to the acclaim of the crowds who hail Him as "Son of David." What follows is a rapid sequence of confrontational acts and contested exchanges: the cleansing of the temple (vv. 12–17), the cursing of the fig tree (vv. 18–22), the challenge to Jesus' authority by the chief priests and elders (vv. 23–27), and then three consecutive parables of judgment — the Two Sons (vv. 28–32), the Wicked Tenants (vv. 33–46), and the Wedding Banquet (22:1–14, though the third parable carries into the next chapter). The chapter closes with the Sanhedrin understanding themselves to be the target of the parables and seeking to arrest Jesus, yet restrained by fear of the crowds.

The chapter's movement is not random. It is a sustained, deliberate demonstration of Jesus' messianic authority — in action (the Entry, the Cleansing, the Cursing), in response to challenge (the Authority Question), and in prophetic teaching (the Parables). Each unit reinforces the same verdict: the Son has come to His Father's house, and the tenants who were supposed to tend it have instead claimed it for themselves and will not surrender it. Jesus is not merely arriving in Jerusalem — He is arriving in judgment.

This Text — Intent

God's intent through this chapter is double: to confront Israel's leadership with the reality of their rejection of the Son, and simultaneously to press every reader toward the same question the chapter poses repeatedly — *who do you say Jesus is, and what are you doing with what He has given you?* The chapter is designed to produce recognition — of who Jesus is, of what His arrival means, and of the inexorable judgment that falls on those who receive the Son's gifts and refuse the Son Himself. The Primary Claim is not merely historical — it is not "look at what happened in Jerusalem in A.D. 30." It is a present claim on every reader: the King has come, His authority is total, and His patience with fruitless religion is exhausted. The chapter means to break any comfortable assumption that one can inhabit the forms of the covenant while refusing its Lord.

Subject Sentence: The King arrives in Jerusalem with total authority — and confronts fruitless religion with imminent judgment.

Primary Claim: The King has come to His own house and found it barren; God is calling every reader to recognize that inherited religious position offers no shelter from the Son's judgment — only genuine fruit does.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Triumphal Entry as Messianic Claim (vv. 1–11)

The central interpretive question in the Entry is whether Matthew presents this as a fully self-conscious messianic claim or as a more ambiguous popular acclamation.

Dispensational interpreters have sometimes read the Entry as the formal offer of the Davidic kingdom to Israel, with the rejection that follows constituting Israel's forfeiture of that kingdom and the subsequent "mystery form" of the kingdom filling the inter-advent age. This reading imports a discontinuity between Israel and the Church that Matthew does not foreground. What Matthew does foreground is the explicit quotation of Zechariah 9:9 (v. 5) and the crowd's Davidic acclamation (v. 9) — Jesus is not offering a kingdom that may or may not be received; He is arriving as the king Zechariah announced, and the reader is meant to recognize this fulfillment. The Reformed reading correctly resists the Dispensational bifurcation: Jesus is not offering a provisional kingdom — He is claiming one. The crowds' partial understanding ("the prophet from Nazareth," v. 11) does not undermine the claim; it underscores the tragic irony Matthew is developing throughout the chapter.

The Temple Cleansing (vv. 12–17)

Wesleyan/Arminian expositors have sometimes read the Cleansing primarily as a model of righteous anger against commercial exploitation — emphasizing the ethical dimension (defending the poor, restoring access to prayer) and applying it as a call to prophetic social action. This reading is not wrong as far as it goes, but it is insufficient. Matthew's framing of the Cleansing is explicitly theological and Christological: Jesus acts on the basis of His authority as messianic lord of the temple (the question of authority in v. 23 is a direct response to what He did here), and the children's cry "Hosanna to the Son of David" in v. 15 connects the Cleansing directly to the Entry's messianic claim. The Cleansing is not primarily about marketplace ethics in sacred space — it is about the Son returning to His Father's house and finding it occupied by those who have turned worship into transaction. The Reformed reading sees the Cleansing as an acted parable of messianic judgment, continuous with the Cursing of the Fig Tree and the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. The ethical dimension is real but secondary to the Christological claim.

The Cursing of the Fig Tree (vv. 18–22)

Several traditions read the cursing of the fig tree primarily as a lesson on the power of faith and prayer (vv. 21–22), since that is where Matthew's explicit teaching lands. This reading is not inaccurate — Matthew does draw that application — but it risks severing the

symbolic from the didactic. Mark's intercalation of the Cursing with the Cleansing (Mark 11) makes the symbolic connection explicit, but even in Matthew's non-intercalated sequence, the juxtaposition is interpretively load-bearing: the fig tree without fruit despite its leaves is Israel's temple establishment — all appearance, no fruit. The cursing is an enacted judgment parable, not merely a demonstration of miraculous power providing a launching point for faith-teaching. A fully orb'd exposition will hold both together: the tree is a sign of judgment on fruitless religion, and the disciples' instruction on faith/prayer is the positive implication Jesus draws for them. To preach only the faith application is to miss the confrontational force of the sign; to preach only the sign is to ignore what Matthew himself chose to emphasize.

The Parable of the Two Sons (vv. 28–32)

The most significant interpretive divergence here is over the textual variants regarding which son represents which response — some manuscripts reverse the order of “yes/no” and “no/yes.” The dominant text (son who refuses then obeys vs. son who agrees then does not) is secure in the major manuscripts and in the Reformation tradition. The interpretive weight falls on v. 32: the issue is not general obedience or disobedience but specifically the response to John's preaching of righteousness — tax collectors and prostitutes believed him; the religious establishment did not, and even seeing this, they did not repent. The parable is not primarily a general lesson about deeds vs. words (the Wesleyan tendency) or about the inclusion of Gentiles (a common misapplication) — it is a specific, historically located confrontation with the leadership's refusal of the gospel.

The Parable of the Wicked Tenants (vv. 33–46)

This parable has generated the most significant interpretive controversy in the chapter. Three questions arise:

First, the identity of the “other nation” (v. 43, “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruit”). Dispensational interpreters have resisted applying this to the Church, insisting the “nation” must be a future Israel. The Reformed reading, consistent with 1 Peter 2:9 (“a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation”), identifies the “nation/people” as the new covenant community — including both Jew and Gentile — who produce the fruit of the kingdom. The parable does not require ethnic discontinuity; it requires covenantal continuity through Christ, the rejected stone who becomes the cornerstone. The Dispensational reading strains the text's own grammar: “nation” (ἔθνος) here is singular and defined by fruit-bearing, not ethnicity.

Second, the stone-saying (vv. 42–44): the quotation of Psalm 118:22–23 (the rejected stone becoming the cornerstone) and the possible allusion to Daniel 7 (the stone that shatters) make clear that the “cornerstone” is Jesus Himself — crucified, rejected, and vindicated. This is the key to the whole chapter's Christology: the entry in v. 1–11, the cleansing in vv. 12–17, and the stone-saying in vv. 42–44 form a single Christological arc. Jesus is not merely a prophet being rejected — He is the Son (v. 38), the heir, the cornerstone. This is a pre-resurrection announcement of the resurrection and vindication pattern.

Third, some Lutheran interpreters have read the parable primarily as law — the crushing weight of judgment upon those who refuse — without adequately carrying through to the gospel implied in the cornerstone imagery. The Reformed reading insists both must be held: the judgment is real (vv. 41, 43–44), and the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone by the Lord’s doing (v. 42, quoting Ps. 118:23 — “this was the Lord’s doing”). The judgment itself is in service of the gospel announcement that the rejected Son will be vindicated.

Key Canonical Support

- **Zechariah 9:9** — “Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey.” Matthew explicitly quotes this in v. 5; the Triumphal Entry is presented as the fulfillment of specific prophetic promise, not merely a popular demonstration. The King’s humility in His mode of arrival is itself part of the prophetic signature.
 - **Psalms 118:22–23, 25–26** — “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone... Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD.” Matthew draws from both the stone-saying (v. 42, judgment parable) and the Hosanna acclamation (v. 9, Entry), making Psalm 118 the canonical backbone of the entire chapter’s Christological claim.
 - **Isaiah 56:7 / Jeremiah 7:11** — “My house shall be called a house of prayer... but you have made it a den of robbers.” Jesus’ citation of both prophets in v. 13 places the Cleansing in a covenant-faithfulness context — the temple is being evaluated against its covenant purpose, and the verdict matches the prophets’ own verdict on Israel’s worship.
 - **Isaiah 5:1–7** — The Song of the Vineyard: “What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it?” Matthew’s Parable of the Wicked Tenants deliberately echoes Isaiah’s vineyard parable, establishing that Jesus is speaking within a deep prophetic tradition of God’s judgment on a fruitless covenant people — and claiming to be the decisive eschatological embodiment of that tradition.
 - **Daniel 2:34–35, 44–45** — The stone not cut by human hands that shatters kingdoms and fills the earth. The “stone” imagery in vv. 42–44 almost certainly draws on Daniel’s stone-kingdom prophecy, connecting the parable’s judgment language to the eschatological establishment of Messiah’s kingdom — the rejected Son is also the stone that fills the whole earth.
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Aim: To press every reader past the comfortable assumption that religious familiarity constitutes covenantal standing — and to confront them with the King who is both the

rejected cornerstone and the coming judge, so that they bear the fruit that only genuine recognition of Him produces.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–3	Jesus sends two disciples to Bethphage to retrieve a donkey and colt; any challenge is to be answered with “The Lord has need of them”	The command demonstrates foreknowledge and sovereign orchestration; “The Lord needs them” — Jesus uses <i>kyrios</i> of Himself
4–5	Fulfillment formula: “This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet” — quoting Zechariah 9:9	Matthew’s explicit fulfillment citation anchors the Entry as messianic claim, not popular enthusiasm
6–7	Disciples obey; garments placed on animals; Jesus sits on them	Quiet obedience; the action itself is the messianic statement
8–9	Crowds spread garments and branches on the road; cry “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”	Ps. 118:25–26 citation; “Son of David” is Messianic title; “Hosanna” = “Save now” — petition becoming praise
10–11	Jerusalem is “stirred” (ἐσεισθη — shaken, as in an earthquake); crowd identifies Jesus as “the prophet from Nazareth of Galilee”	The city’s reaction — stirring/shaking — anticipates the quake at the crucifixion (27:51) and resurrection (28:2); the crowd’s partial answer (“prophet”) is insufficient but not wrong
12–13	Jesus enters the temple, drives out money-changers and dove-sellers, overturns tables and seats; quotes Isa. 56:7 and Jer. 7:11	“My Father’s house” implied in “my house”; the act is judicial, not impulsive; both prophetic citations establish the covenantal frame
14	Blind and lame come to Jesus in the temple; He	The cleansed temple becomes a place of healing

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	heals them	— what worship was always meant to enable; contrast with v. 12
15–16	Chief priests and scribes are indignant at children’s “Hosanna to the Son of David”; Jesus responds with Ps. 8:2	Leaders’ indignation vs. children’s recognition — irony of perception; Ps. 8:2 (“out of the mouths of infants”) vindicates the praise
17	Jesus leaves for Bethany and lodges there	Withdrawal to Bethany each night of Passion Week is a structural feature
18–19	Jesus returns to Jerusalem; sees fig tree in leaf, finds no fruit, curses it; it withers immediately	The immediately withered tree (Matthew’s version; Mark spreads this over two days) intensifies the judicial force
20–22	Disciples marvel at the withered tree; Jesus teaches on faith and prayer — “whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith”	Matthew explicitly shifts to faith/prayer application; the sign’s symbolic dimension (judgment on fruitlessness) is not erased but the application is drawn for the disciples specifically
23	In the temple, chief priests and elders challenge: “By what authority are you doing these things?”	The challenge is directly provoked by the Cleansing (vv. 12–13) and the healing (v. 14); authority is the chapter’s central question
24–26	Jesus counters: “Where did John’s baptism come from — heaven or from man?” They refuse to answer, fearing the crowd	The counter-question is not evasion but exposure: their refusal to acknowledge John reveals their refusal to acknowledge Jesus; same divine authority is in question
27	They say “We do not know”; Jesus refuses to answer their question	A double exposure: they will not commit; Jesus will not validate their bad-faith inquiry

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
28–30	Parable of Two Sons: father tells both sons to work in the vineyard; first refuses then goes; second agrees but does not go	The contrast is action vs. profession
31a	Jesus asks which son did the father's will; they correctly answer the first	They pronounce their own verdict, as the Sanhedrin will do again in vv. 40–41
31b–32	Verdict: tax collectors and prostitutes believed John; you did not; even seeing their belief, you did not repent	The scandal: those with no religious standing entered the kingdom; those with every advantage refused; “even seeing this” — inexcusable
33–34	Parable of the Wicked Tenants: landowner plants vineyard (Isa. 5 echoes), leases it, goes away; at harvest sends servants for fruit	The vineyard = Israel's covenant; servants = the prophets
35–36	Tenants beat, kill, and stone successive servants; landowner sends more	Escalating rejection; the pattern of persecuting the prophets (cf. Matt. 23:37)
37	Finally the landowner sends his son: “They will respect my son”	The Sonship claim is explicit here — this is not another servant; it is the Son
38–39	Tenants see the son, plan to kill him and seize the inheritance, throw him out and kill him	The logic of their sin is exposed: they know who he is and kill him <i>because</i> he is the heir — malice, not ignorance
40–41	Jesus asks what the owner will do; they answer: he will “put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons”	They condemn themselves; the answer is historically accurate (A.D. 70) and covenantally exact
42	Jesus quotes Ps. 118:22–23: the rejected stone has	The crucifixion/resurrection pattern is anticipated; the

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	become the cornerstone; “this was the Lord’s doing”	rejection is real, the vindication is certain; it is the Lord’s own doing
43	“The kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a people producing its fruit”	The decisive verdict; “people” (ἔθνος) = fruit- bearing covenant community, not defined ethnically
44	“The one who falls on this stone will be broken; when it falls on anyone, it will crush him”	The stone functions as both stumbling block and crushing judgment — no neutral response to Jesus is possible
45–46	The chief priests and Pharisees perceive the parable is about them; they want to arrest Jesus but fear the crowd	Recognition — but recognition leading to hostility, not repentance; the perceptive reader is meant to choose differently

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–11	The King Arrives: Triumphal Entry
2	12–17	The King Judges His House: Temple Cleansing
3	18–22	The Sign of Fruitlessness: The Cursed Fig Tree
4	23–27	The Authority Confrontation
5	28–32	Parable One: The Two Sons — Profession vs. Obedience
6	33–46	Parable Two: The Wicked Tenants — The Son Rejected, the Kingdom Reassigned

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The King arrives in Jerusalem with total authority — and confronts fruitless religion with imminent judgment.

Primary Claim: The King has come to His own house and found it barren; God is calling every reader to recognize that inherited religious position offers no shelter from the Son's judgment — only genuine fruit does.

Applications (Five)

1. Examine whether your religious activity has confused the appearance of worship with its substance. (*Mind/Belief*) The fig tree had leaves — the full appearance of a fruit-bearing tree — and nothing else. The temple courts were full of religious activity: animals, money, sacrifice, transaction — and Jesus drove it all out. The chapter's sustained confrontation is not with irreligion but with religion that has mastered the appearance while abandoning the substance. Every reader who inhabits Christian forms — church attendance, doctrinal familiarity, ministry participation — must ask not “am I here?” but “is there fruit?” The question is not whether you are in the vineyard. The tenants were in the vineyard. The question is whether you are giving the owner what the vineyard is for.

2. Let the humility of the King's arrival reorder what you are hoping He will do for you. (*Affections/Worship*) The crowd cried “Hosanna” — Save now — and meant it as a victory cry for the liberation they expected. They wanted a triumphant military messiah; they got a king on a donkey, quoting Zechariah's prophecy of humble arrival. The gap between what they wanted and what the King actually came to do is the gap between our instinctive religion and the gospel. We want a king who will fix our circumstances; God sends a king who will fix our hearts, carry our judgment, and be thrown out of the vineyard so that we can be let back in. Let the donkey correct your expectations. Worship the king you actually have, not the king you originally wanted.

3. Receive the authority of Jesus over every domain you have privately reserved for yourself. (*Will/Behavior*) Jesus walked into the temple — the most sacred, bounded, institutional religious space in Israel — and turned it inside out. His authority was not negotiable, was not deferential to existing arrangements, and was not limited to the domain the establishment was willing to cede to Him. The chief priests and elders asked “by what authority?” because they had assumed there were limits. There are not. Identify the room in your life where you are conducting the equivalent of money-changing — where something of God is being used for your own ends — and open that room to the King's inspection. The question is not whether He has authority there. He does. The question is whether you will stop defending the arrangement.

4. Grieve the inexorable logic of self-protective unbelief — and recognize it in yourself before it hardens. (*Affections/Worship*) The tenants' logic is chilling precisely because it is

coherent: “This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.” They are not confused about who He is. They kill Him *because* they know — because acknowledging the Son would mean surrendering the vineyard. The chapter invites the reader to feel the horror of this — and then to ask whether any version of that logic operates in their own heart. Do you know what Jesus is asking of you, and is that knowledge the very reason you are not doing it? The text is designed to produce grief and self-examination, not merely historical outrage at first-century religious leaders.

5. Produce the fruit of the kingdom now — in this season, in this position — rather than waiting for better conditions. (*Will/Behavior*) The landowner sent for fruit “when the season for fruit drew near” (v. 34) — at the appointed time, from the appointed tenants, in the appointed place. The reckoning was not arbitrary. Every person entrusted with a portion of God’s covenant community — a family, a congregation, a friendship, a sphere of influence — will be asked what was produced in the season given. The parable does not picture the tenants as having no resources, no opportunity, or unfavorable conditions. They had everything they needed. They simply refused to give the owner what was his. What has been entrusted to you, and what fruit is accumulating — or not — in this specific season of your stewardship?

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Matthew 21 is one of Scripture’s most concentrated revelations of Jesus’ messianic identity and its covenantal implications. The chapter teaches that Jesus’ authority is total, unmediated, and not subject to the approval of existing religious institutions — He walks into the temple and acts as its Lord, because He is. It teaches that the covenant community is defined by fruit-bearing, not by inherited position — the kingdom is given to a people who produce its fruit, not to those who hold its forms. It teaches that the rejection of the Son is not a historical accident but a covenantally anticipated pattern (the servants before the Son; Psalm 118’s rejected stone; Isaiah’s fruitless vineyard) — and that this rejection, while real and culpable, is taken up by God into the very act of vindication: “This was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.” The chapter thereby teaches that the cross is not a defeat that God subsequently reverses, but an event that the Lord Himself was doing, issuing in the cornerstone the builders refused to use.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Matthew 21 is exegetically decisive for several cardinal Reformed convictions. First, it grounds Christology in fulfillment rather than projection: Jesus does not claim messianic identity rhetorically — He enacts it in deliberate, prophetically legible actions that require the reader to either accept or reject the claim on the text’s own terms. Second, the chapter demolishes any theology of merit or

inherited covenant standing: the kingdom is taken from those who have the longest and deepest claim to it by heritage, and given to those who produce its fruit — which the chapter ultimately grounds not in moral effort but in the response of faith (the tax collectors who “believed” John, v. 32). Third, the Parable of the Wicked Tenants displays the Reformed understanding of redemptive history as a single covenant of grace with escalating revelation: servants, then the Son — the prophets, then Christ. The Son’s death is not a new plan; it is the culmination of the one plan. Fourth, the stone-saying (vv. 42–44) presents the cross-resurrection pattern in terms that ground the Reformed *ordo salutis* in the Messiah’s own death and vindication: the rejected stone that becomes the cornerstone is the very basis on which a new covenant people is constituted. The gospel is not announced here in its fullness — the resurrection awaits — but the chapter is irreversibly pointed toward it.

Main Takeaway

Main Takeaway: The King has arrived, and He is not impressed by the religious furniture you have accumulated. He walked into the holiest institution in Israel and overturned it, cursed the tree that looked alive but produced nothing, and told the tenants that the vineyard would be taken from them and given to those who actually bear fruit. Stop defending your religious arrangements and ask a harder question: when the King inspects what He has entrusted to you, what will He find? The cornerstone the builders rejected is now the judge — and He is also the only one who can make you fruitful.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls:

- **Treating the Triumphal Entry as a celebration rather than a claim.** Palm Sunday preaching frequently pitches the Entry as a moment of triumph and joy — which it partly is — while missing the irony Matthew is threading throughout the chapter. The crowd acclaims Jesus without understanding Him (“the prophet from Nazareth,” v. 11); the city is shaken (ἐσείσθη, v. 10) — the same word used for earthquakes at the crucifixion and resurrection — and Jesus proceeds immediately to the temple in judgment. The Entry is not a triumphal parade; it is the King arriving for inspection. Preach it as arrival and claim, not as festival and celebration.
- **Separating the fig tree’s symbolic and didactic dimensions.** Because Matthew draws the faith/prayer application explicitly (vv. 21–22), expositors often preach the cursing of the fig tree as simply a lesson on the power of prayer, effectively ignoring the enacted judgment parable. The withered tree without fruit is Israel’s religious establishment under judgment — that is the sign. The disciples’ instruction on faith is the application Jesus makes for them from the sign. Missing the sign produces a

sermon that could have been preached from any number of passages; missing the application ignores what Matthew himself emphasized. Both must be held.

- **Reducing the Temple Cleansing to a social-ethics text.** Preaching the Cleansing as primarily about economic exploitation in religious spaces or defending the poor against religious commercialism, while not wrong, strips away the Christological center: Jesus is the messianic Lord of the temple, and His action is an enacted parable of judgment that directly provokes the authority challenge of v. 23. The question “by what authority?” is not a bureaucratic inquiry — it is the chapter’s central question, and the Cleansing is what raised it.
- **Applying the Parable of the Wicked Tenants moralistically.** The temptation is to land the parable as “be a good steward of what God has given you” — a legitimate implication but not the parable’s primary force. The parable is first and foremost Christological: the Son is the heir, the tenants know He is the heir, and they kill Him precisely because He is. The judgment-and-vindication pattern (rejected stone → cornerstone) is the parable’s climax, and any application that does not pass through the identity and fate of the Son is a moralistic reduction. Preach the stone-saying as the gospel hinge, not as a footnote.
- **Identifying the chapter’s target as “them, then” rather than “us, now.”** The chapter’s confrontation is directed at first-century Jewish leadership — that is historically accurate. But Matthew writes for a community that needs to hear it as a current claim. The chief priests and Pharisees understood the parables were about them (v. 45) and responded with hostility. The reader who understands the parables are about him and responds with repentance and fruit-bearing is the intended outcome. Preach the judgment as live and present, not as a historical verdict on a safely distant group.
- **Missing the unified Christological arc across the chapter’s diverse units.** Matthew 21 contains an entry, a healing incident, a nature miracle, a confrontation, and two parables — the temptation is to treat each unit as a separate pericope with its own independent point. But Matthew has stitched them together around a single question (By what authority? — vv. 23, 24, 27) and a single claim (Jesus is the Son, the cornerstone, the messianic Lord). The chapter’s power is in its cumulative force. Preach the movement, not just the units.